

US Mid-East talks: A conspiracy against the Palestinians

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2 September 2010

Today's talks in Washington between Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas are a means through which the United States is seeking to further its predatory interests in the Middle East.

The Obama administration placed maximum pressure on Abbas to take part and abandon, in practice if not in words, the PA's insistence that there would be no discussion without an end to settlement construction by Israel.

A 10-month freeze on settlement construction on the West Bank is due to expire on September 26 and Netanyahu has made clear to his party and coalition government allies that it will not be renewed. The Palestinians threatened that there would be no negotiations if this happened and appealed for support from Washington.

The Mid-East Quartet—the US, European Union, United Nations and Russia—are formally opposed to settlement construction. But the US placed no demands on Israel and stressed instead that talks must proceed “without precondition,” as insisted on by Tel Aviv.

The head of the General Delegation of the Palestine Liberation Organization to the US, Maen Rashid Areikat, was asked directly by *Ha'aretz* whether the Palestinians were pressured to give up their demand for Israel to extend its settlement freeze. He replied evasively that he would not “characterize it as pressure.”

He made clear that the PA could not simply accede to US dictates and abandon the issue altogether: “Ordinary Palestinians can see the settlement activity going on the Palestinian territories, and then they wonder if the Israelis are serious about the negotiations and giving back this land for us to build our own state... That's why we cannot negotiate if they continue building.”

Even so, as far as the Palestinian masses are concerned, nothing is being offered that does not meet with the prior approval of Israel's ruling elite.

There is a propaganda offensive being waged to claim that Israel is offering substantive concessions in the talks. Defense Minister Ehud Barak was wheeled out to claim in

an interview with *Ha'aretz* that he and Netanyahu were committed to “Two states for two nations.”

But he again reiterated the demand that any resolution be based upon creating a state with “a solid Jewish majority for generations” and, on the other side, “a demilitarized Palestinian state.” An agreement would keep “the settlement blocs in our hands, retrieving and relocating the isolated settlements into the settlement blocs or within Israel.” There would be no right of return of Palestinians to Israel, but only to the Palestinian state.

On the issue of Jerusalem, he said, “West Jerusalem and 12 Jewish neighborhoods that are home to 200,000 residents will be ours. The Arab neighborhoods in which close to a quarter million Palestinians live will be theirs. There will be a special regime in place along with agreed upon arrangements in the Old City, the Mount of Olives and the City of David.”

This formula based on “neighbourhoods” falls far short of accepting East Jerusalem as the capital of a Palestinian state. More important still, it legitimises the seizure of much of the best West Bank land through the settlements programme. It does not allow for the formation of a state that is “viable politically, economically, and territorially,” as Barak claimed. It will leave the Palestinians in control of somewhat less than 20 percent of what was historically Palestine.

Netanyahu has in the past been even more forthright than Barak, insisting that Jerusalem will remain Israel's undivided capital and that Israel must have defensible borders, requiring an Israeli presence on the eastern border of any future Palestinian state.

Danny Dayan, a member of the Yesha Council, the leading organization of the settlers' movement, was in Washington at the same time as Netanyahu, lobbying Jewish and congressional leaders to convince them of the importance of expanding Israel's settlements yet further into Palestinian territory.

Under these circumstances, Abbas's presence in Washington only confirms his role as a pliant tool of the US, who relies on Washington's sponsorship to ensure the

continued backing of Palestine's multi-millionaire rulers and maintain himself and his coterie in power against a restive and hostile Palestinian population.

Egypt and Jordan, which would control the non-Israeli side of the borders of a putative Palestinian state, are playing their part in this US-inspired political conspiracy. Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and Jordan's King Abdullah took part in last night's preliminary talks hosted by President Obama. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton held meetings Tuesday with Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Abul Gheit and his Jordanian counterpart, Nasser Judah.

The US is also urging peace talks between Israel, Syria and Lebanon, with US Mid-East envoy George Mitchell stating, "With respect to Syria, our efforts continue to try to engage Israel and Syria in discussions and negotiations that would lead to peace there and also Israel and Lebanon."

The *Hurriyet Daily News* reported Egyptian Foreign Minister Gheit stating that Syria was ready for talks with Israel and would not seek to derail Middle East peace efforts. The newspaper wrote: "I don't think the brothers in Syria are impeding anything," he told the independent Egyptian daily Al-Masri Al-Yom. "The brothers in Syria are hosting a group of organizations and leaderships that reject this program (of direct talks), but I know Syria is prepared to hold negotiations with Israel."

Hamas, the Islamist party which governs the Gaza Strip, is opposed to the talks. On Tuesday, its armed wing shot dead four Israelis, including a pregnant woman, near the settlement of Kiryat Arba, near Hebron on the West Bank. This evoked threats from Netanyahu, who warned, "We will find the murderers, we will punish their dispatchers," with security forces operating "without diplomatic restraint," i.e., inside the Palestinian West Bank.

They did not need to do so, as Palestinian security forces mounted a huge operation to arrest dozens of Hamas members and seal off villages near Hebron. Hamas claims PA authorities have raided 250 homes of Hamas members in the region. The Yesha Council has said it will restart construction in the West Bank in protest over the attack.

Despite this action by Hamas, behind the scenes negotiations are taking place with Washington. Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal admitted to a *Huffington Post* blogger that his officials have been in indirect talks with the US for some time. "We know very well that some non-US officials we meet with report to the administration... We are interested in meeting with the Americans and the West, but we do not beg for these meetings and we are not in a hurry."

The same day as the Hebron attack, Mitchell stated that the US was seeking to engage with Syria. He added that Hamas would not "play a role in this immediate process," but "we welcome the full participation of Hamas and all relevant

parties once they comply with basic principles of democracy."

The push for the talks, and the readiness to engage with various previously ostracised states and movements including Hamas, is an attempt to isolate Iran and secure America's grip on the Middle East and its oil riches.

Rahm Emanuel, Obama's chief of staff, said in an interview, "There are three big chess pieces here, and in each of those places we are now poised for success," adding that "victory begets victory, and success will be reinforcing."

Martin S. Indyk, who served as American ambassador to Israel and now is the director of foreign policy at the Brookings Institution, added, "It's hard to make the case that progress in the peace process is going to resolve the political stalemate in Iraq, or force the Iranians to reconsider their nuclear program. But I think you can claim that success would help make headway in isolating Iran, and Iran's claims to leadership in the region would be challenged."

State Department spokesman Philip J. Crowley said, "Iraq in the past and Iran in the present have tried to take advantage of the Middle East conflict to use that sense of grievance" to promote their interests. A peace deal "offers the prospect of a much more integrated, much more constructive region in the future."

The conditions for any genuine "progress" in peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians are entirely absent. But the illusion of substantive talks plays a central role in facilitating a political alignment by the Arab regimes behind Washington's plans for aggressive action against Iran, up to and including a military strike.



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